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## Executive Search Viewpoint:

# Transferable Experience and the Soft Skills Necessary for Institutional Excellence

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As executive search consultants, one of our responsibilities is to bring a broader perspective to our clients by enhancing the field of candidates. Most people instinctively believe they need someone from a similar organization and setting, and we support this line of thinking and include it as part of our search strategy. However, in today's world, due to the talent shortage, we don't always have the luxury of being laser-focused and leaving out potential candidates.

Often, to supplement the candidates who have seemingly spot-on credentials, our view is: where *haven't* we looked or where *can* we look, to find candidates with similar – or, maybe better yet – complementary skillsets? To find out-of-the-box or non-traditional candidates, we consider transferable abilities, both soft skills and technical experience, to understand the different environments from which candidates could come.

The talent pool for facilities management roles can be vast if you consider adjacent skills. In our experience, we have found that the following types of professionals transition well into middle management and senior leadership positions within facilities management.

### ➡ Military Veterans

With experience leading large teams comprising both civilians and active military, veterans typically have the organizational skills and collaborative management style necessary to drive a flourishing institutional or campus environment.

### ➡ Architects and Design Engineers

Understanding drawings and capital construction master planning, these professionals pay close attention to detail and can help control the design process whether it be renovations, new projects, or existing facilities maintenance in an institutional or campus environment.

### ➡ Planners from Public Agencies

The abilities to interface and collaborate with a multitude of designers and construction firms give local, regional, and state planners excellent transferable skills for facilities-related roles. These professionals can be keenly aware of the market and what works well (and what doesn't), which can impact the management of a large facilities team, campus, and various end-users.

### ➡ Project Executives and Estimators from construction firms

Contracts are difficult to design and understand, and these types of professionals offer expertise in this area. Their negotiation skills and analytical mindsets make them desirable candidates for roles related to facilities and capital construction in an institutional or campus environment.



### ➔ Asset Managers and Planners from real estate development firms

No one handles third-party contractors quite like asset managers and urban, community, or site planners. Selecting the right vendors, respecting punctuality and quality, as well as keeping their end-users' best interests in mind, these professionals do well in an institutional setting because of their relationship-driven approach.

If you're considering whether or not a non-traditional candidate might successfully transfer to your institutional setting, think about the individual's soft skills in addition to their technical experience and capabilities. Soft skills such as business acumen, teamwork, and personnel development bode well when partnering with leadership, third-party vendors, and end-users. If you're the hiring manager or a member of the search committee, the following are suggestions for the interview process to decipher whether the candidate possesses these attributes:

### ➔ Business Acumen

As the employer, you want to get a sense of strong business acumen. Listen to how a candidate answers questions specifically regarding the budget, how they've advanced their organization (and whether they explain this using a business-process approach), what technology they use, their thought process for analyzing their investments and market exposure, and opportunities they have found to enhance market share.

### ➔ Teamwork/Collaboration

Do more listening and deep-diving than talking when it comes to the candidate's teamwork and "big picture"

experience. Pay attention to how they describe what they've done in their career, and always ask references about the collaborative solutions they developed. Ask: "Tell me about a time when a customer asked for something you couldn't deliver," and you'll find out whether they negotiated and spent time finding mutually beneficial solutions, or only communicate a one-track mindset.

### ➔ Personnel Development

Specifics are important, and you want to see the actions taken and the results achieved to get a baseline for whether or not the candidate would be effective with succession planning efforts. Ask the candidate, "Tell me about a time when a person under your supervision was underperforming. What did you do?" A professional skilled in personnel development should be able to target the weakness and provide solutions to address it. To gain further insight, it can be helpful to acquire a reference from one of the candidate's subordinates.

Broadening your horizons as a hiring manager is critical in today's world. Although technical skills are important in candidates, what tends to be more difficult is to find and uncover are soft skills. Those stated above are essential for successful leadership, which is why we emphasize them to our clients. Your next facilities hire could be a military veteran or a planner from a public agency, but unless he or she is a big-picture thinker devoted to improving processes and maximizing efficiencies, they are not likely to fit into an institutional setting. Hire for the core, and make sure the person has the necessary soft skills to navigate the workplace – and watch them fly.

Helbling & Associates is a retained executive search firm specializing exclusively in architecture, engineering, and construction; facilities management; and real estate development.

